

Subcommittee on Children and Families - Re-Authorization of the Community Services
Block Grant Program

Bill Number: Oversight

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Witness:

Winifred Octave from Worcester, MA
(client)

Testimony:

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Winifred Octave. I was born in St. Lucia, West Indies and immigrated to the United States permanently in 1979. I've been a U.S. citizen for more than 10 years. I worked for Merrill Lynch in New York for 15 years as a Settlement Specialist before moving in Worcester Massachusetts in 1994. I worked as a legal secretary for a Worcester law firm until they went out of business in 2000, and I was laid off.

I am a single parent with three children. My 21-year-old son served for two months in Iraq and is now in Japan, on his way to the Philippines. I have a 13-year-old daughter and an 8-year-old son.

When the law firm laid me off in 2000 I went to the unemployment office to apply for benefits and to find out what was available. Since I didn't have good computer skills, I knew I needed more training. One of the places that was suggested to me was the Worcester Community Action Council. Since I didn't have a car, and WCAC was easy to get to, I picked WCAC. I honestly believe God helped me make that choice.

I went to "school" at WCAC for 12 weeks. I learned new computer skills. I got to practice interviewing for a job with people who came from companies in Worcester. I learned to write a resume. I also learned about credit and budgeting and other useful information from the teachers and other WCAC staff. Everyone was very helpful. After I finished the course, I received help in getting a job. I've been with this employer since I left the class in 2000.

WCAC helped me in many other ways. I qualified for fuel assistance. I joined Worcester Community Connections, a parent empowerment program that is housed at WCAC.

Because I got involved in Community Connections, I learned about home ownership opportunities for families like mine. I applied to a community development corporation (with help from WCAC staff) and I was selected to buy a two family home where I know live with my children. The house has been weatherized by WCAC. Also, I learned about the need for foster parents in our community. So I signed up with the Dept. of Social Services to become a foster parent. I attended 8 weeks of classes and learned First Aid and other important skills. I'm now waiting for my first foster child.

When I was still in the training program, I heard about the WCAC board of directors and how to become a member. I wanted to do that. Since 2001, I have been a representative of the low-income sector and I report to the board on what is happening in my neighborhood and with Community Connections. I've learned a lot about Worcester since joining the board and also the towns where WCAC provides services. I learn about programs and funding and we talk about issues that affect the agency and low income working families like mine. Many of the board members are business people and elected officials (or their representatives). Those board members want to help people but they

don't know what it's like to go through problems in the community. I do and so do the other low-income representatives on the board. We live in the neighborhoods and know what kinds of problems people like us are having. At board meetings I can talk about what the needs are. For example, I've talked about the kids in my neighborhood who have nothing to do. So some of the neighbors and agencies are meeting to try and start a youth center in our neighborhood. Talking about this at board meetings is a way to keep other people informed about what is going on.

I tell everybody about WCAC. I have sent so many people to the WCAC office for services. I want to help "give people a better life." I think by volunteering and by being a WCAC Board member, I can help others like I was helped. Because of the services I received at WCAC, I am self-sufficient. That makes me feel very proud. And my daughter is so proud that I am able to be here today with all of you.

Speaking for the WCAC Board of Directors and staff, I want to thank you for your support of the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG).